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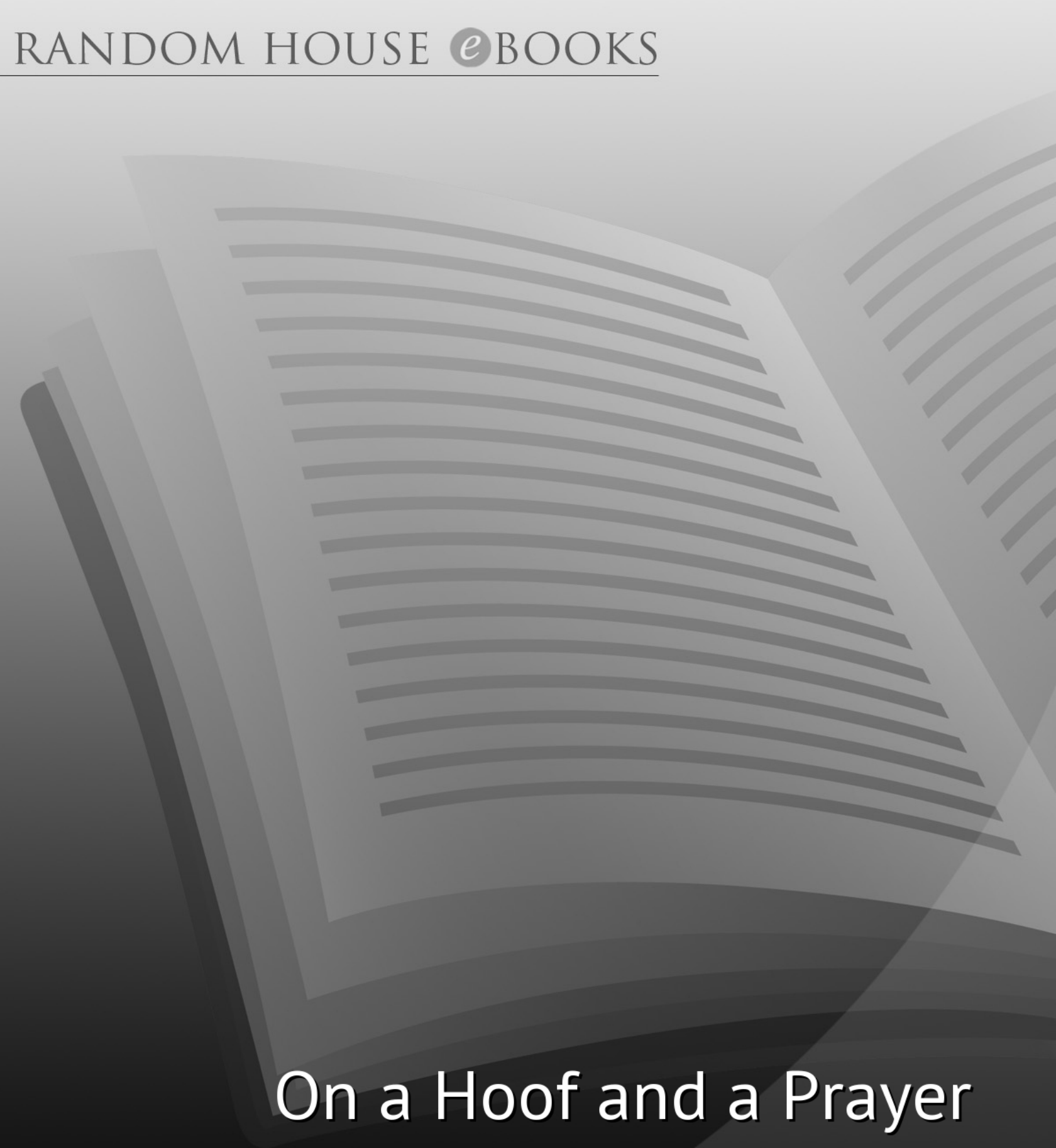

On a Hoof and a Prayer

Polly Evans

About the Book

At the age of thirty-four, Polly Evans decides to fulfil a childhood dream – to learn how to ride a horse. But rather than do so conveniently close to home, she goes to Argentina and saddles up among the gauchos. Overcoming battered limbs, a steed hell-bent on bolting, and an encounter with the teeth of one very savage dog, Polly canters through Andean vineyards and gallops beneath snow-capped Patagonian peaks. She also survives a hair-raising game of polo and a back-breaking day herding cattle.

Taking a break from riding, Polly delves into Argentina's tumultuous history: the Europeans' first terrifying acquaintances with the native 'giants'; the sanguinary demise of the early missionaries; and the gruesome drama of Evita's wandering corpse.

On a Hoof and a Prayer is the stampeding story of Polly's journey from timorous equestrian novice to wildly whooping cowgirl. It's a tale of ponies, painkillers and peregrinations – not just around present-day Argentina, but also into the country's glorious and turbulent past.

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Polly Evans

For Inaara, with love

Acknowledgements

My adventures in Argentina were suprisingly comfortable give or take odd incidents with the occasional ferocious dog or bolting horse. The fact that I only had to go to hospital once and returned home with no life-altering injuries is in large part thanks to the following.

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Tilcara
PARAGUAY
Salta
Cachi
Cafayate
Tucumán
Puerto Iguazú
Posadas
BRAZIL
Rio Ceballos
Córdoba
Mendoza
URUGUAY
Buenos Aires
Luján
CHILE
Dolores
ARGENTINA
San Martín de los Andes
N
Bariloche
Puerto Madryn
Gaiman
PENINSULA VALDÉS
0 Miles 500
0 Kilometres 800
El Calafate
Ushuaia
GOWER

1

The Starting Gate

AS A CHILD, I longed to ride a horse. My girlish dreams were peppered with fantasies of bright red gymkhana rosettes and deliciously exciting grooming sessions in which I would brush my pet's sleek coat till it gleamed like polished ebony.

I devoured the adventures of *Black Beauty*. I was given an old hardcover copy of *Jill's Gymkhana* with a sand-coloured binding that must have been bought at a jumble sale somewhere, and I read and re-read it with avid enthusiasm. After all, if Jill had managed to happen upon enough money to buy herself a pony, why shouldn't I? I gazed enraptured through *National Velvet*. But those Grand National fences seemed nothing to the hurdle I faced: that of convincing my parents of my need.

For years I pestered them. I wanted riding lessons. They thought the piano more suitable. I still wanted riding lessons. But ballet was so much more ladylike. I wanted a horse. Where would it live? I thought the back garden would do fine. Who would look after it? I would, of course. Who was going to pay for it? Well, they could – couldn't they?

But realistically they could not and so the horse was never forthcoming. Christmases and birthdays came and went, and I never unwrapped so much as a My Little Pony. Not even my Cindy doll was given a horse. Cindy, instead, received a bathtub and a wedding dress – clean, wholesome, morally upright playthings.

The time went by and the obsession died. Through my teenage years, I don't suppose I'd have been seen dead round a horse. In my twenties, I developed an unhealthy preoccupation with swimming and biking and running. It wasn't until I was in my mid-thirties that the niggling little thought began to trot around inside my head once more: wouldn't it be fun to learn to ride?

But where should I go for lessons? I didn't much like the idea of plodding round a London park for forty pounds an hour. And why spend week after week joggling round a riding-school ring attempting to master the very British rising trot when there was a world out there with wide-open spaces to gallop through, places where nobody cared if my heels were down or my head was high? Why squeeze into an unflattering pair of jodhpurs when I could deck myself out in leather chaps and jingling spurs, and gallop with the cowboys through the ranches of Wyoming? Why strap on a hard, black hat when I could wear a fur-trimmed bonnet and ride wild with the nomads across the Mongolian steppe?

There were the Berber horsemen of Morocco. Surely they could do with a new companion with whom to charge across the desert; perhaps they needed a tea girl to serve their mint infusions as they rested beneath the stars. Or maybe I should grab a sabre and head to the spice-scented east to ride with the Rajputs through the ancient battle grounds of princely Rajasthan.

But the Rajputs' horse days were gone, and the offspring of those famously wild warriors probably spent their days not in the saddle but selling second-hand Ambassador cars on the streets of Jaipur. In any case, I reflected, it might make sense to take lessons in a country where I at least spoke the language. Should I, then, join up with the Canadian Mounties? Or with the *gardiens* of the Camargue? Or, perhaps, I could head for the far-flung south, to Argentina, and take my first equine steps among the gauchos.

Horsemanship courses through Argentina's fiery Latin veins. The country as we know it owes its very existence to the horse, for without their steeds the Spanish could never have conquered the ferocious Indian tribes who had inhabited South America for many thousands of years. The Indians had never set eyes on these four-legged creatures before the Spaniards arrived, and they viewed them at first with utter, debilitating terror. They believed horse and rider formed a single, supernatural monstrosity and that the Spaniards' gunfire constituted the roar of an animal enraged.

It didn't take long for them to conquer their fear. In 1536, the Spaniard Pedro de Mendoza founded the settlement of Buenos Aires, but he was soon overwhelmed by the indigenous population. Mendoza fled back to Spain, abandoning a handful of horses to run wild on the pampas. It was the perfect environment for them: there were endless grass plains, plenty of water, a temperate climate, and very few predators. The horses bred. By 1580, when Juan de Garay returned to re-take Buenos Aires, he found the province full of wild herds – and, gradually, the Indians learned to ride them.

Still today, horses play a vital role in Argentine life. The cattle on the estancias, or ranches, are herded on horseback just as they were a century ago. Horses continue to provide the principal form of transport for many rural folk. In the plush Buenos Aires district of Palermo, the polo ground plays host to the finest players in the world.

I did a little research. I sent some emails. I received a reply from Robin Begg, an Anglo-Argentine whose family had owned their six-thousand-acre cattle farm in Córdoba province for generations. Now Robin's father handled the cattle-breeding operation while Robin used the estancia to run horse-riding holidays for visitors. He invited me to his farm for a week. He would, he proclaimed with disarming confidence, teach me to ride. After my week at Robin's, I'd

take off to tour the country for eight weeks further, riding horses wherever I could find them. I'd canter across Argentina's flat, open grasslands, into its spectacular Andean mountains, and through its southern Patagonian parks where mighty condors would soar before snow-capped peaks and pristine lakes.

Joyfully, I drew a line through my diary from mid-October to mid-December: while in England the days would be drawing short and grey, in Argentina it would be springtime. The trees would be sprouting fresh green shoots, the cattle would be suckling their knock-kneed calves – and I'd be sauntering among them all, high on my horse.

'Aren't you scared?' my friends asked me again and again. After the tenth time, I started to wonder if, perhaps, they knew something I didn't.

'What will happen if you get there and find that you really hate riding?' some forward-thinking souls asked with the chipper confidence of those who know they are going to spend the next few months safe and warm in a centrally heated office with nothing more frightening than a weekend break to France thrown in to ease the tedium.

'Whatever you do, don't ride in jeans,' my friend Ruth advised me when I told her of my forthcoming adventure. She pulled up her trouser legs and showed me scars on her calves: Ruth used to ride daily as a teenager and the sores caused by denim seams rubbing her skin had apparently marked her for life. 'Oh yes, and also, remember that after you've been riding you will really stink.'

'Pack painkillers,' said some.

'Take arnica,' declared others.

'*Always* wear gloves,' instructed my friend Jenny.

'You must take Elliman's horse liniment to rub into your legs,' Pam, a septuagenarian friend, pronounced imperiously.

'Horse liniment? But isn't that for horses?' I asked, trying hard to hide my horror.

‘Oh yes, but I know plenty of humans who use it too. It’s powerful stuff and you might be needing it,’ she said in a no-nonsense kind of way.

I went nervously to the chemist. They didn’t stock Elliman’s; I settled for arnica and ibuprofen. I packed fleecy trousers – and threw in a pair of jeans just in case. I blithely ignored the instruction regarding riding gloves. And then, I boarded the plane.

2

A Foot in the Stirrups

ROBIN'S DRIVER, FABIO, collected me from Córdoba airport in a long-bonneted Ford pick-up. Its leather-upholstered banquette stretched wide enough to accommodate a family. We drove out of the city and passed through flat fields and grassland – some green, some the colour of pale straw. Cattle and horses grazed. We came into the town of Río Ceballos where Ford Dodges and huge, antiquated American cars ornamented with rust weaved through the streets.

'Argentines can't drive,' Fabio shrugged as he swung out of the way of a truck intent on collision.

Leaving the Chevrolets, we turned right onto an unmetalled track, then climbed higher and higher into the Sierra Chica hills. The land undulated green and gold for as far as the eye could see. The buzz of the city was far below us now.

'That building there,' Fabio pointed across the hillside to a tiny, one-storey whitewashed construction, 'that's the local school. It's very small – only about ten or twenty children go there.'

The schoolhouse was right in the middle of nowhere. No roads seemed to lead to it. I asked Fabio how the children travelled there each day.

'Oh,' he said, 'they ride there on horseback.'

He said it nonchalantly, as if to ride one's horse to school were the most natural thing in the world.

‘How old are the children?’ I asked, trying to hide my urbanite’s surprise.

‘Oh, the youngest ones are probably about six, I suppose.’

‘And they ride a horse to school, all alone?’

‘Oh, the little ones ride with the older kids.’

So here I was at last in Argentina, where six-year-olds travelled to school on horseback. I was a long, long way from home, where harassed, highlighted mothers ferried their offspring through city streets in outsized SUVs. Here in the Sierra Chica there was no school bus. And if the six-year-olds were so competent, why, after a couple of lessons, shouldn’t I be? A small current of euphoria sparked within me. I hadn’t even made it to the corral, yet already I felt a powerful sense of arrival.

We wound our way higher into the hills. A tinamou scuttled out of our path. As we drove through the gates of Estancia Los Potreros, a pair of bright green monk parakeets flitted between the trees.

‘You can teach those birds to talk,’ Fabio told me. ‘You have to cover up their cage, then give them a piece of bread soaked in wine. It loosens their tongues.’

We rattled along a track until we finally arrived in front of an L-shaped, whitewashed house. The house sat slightly elevated from the lawn that spread before it: at intervals, staircases of five or six stone steps led up to a terrace, raised to the same level as the floor of the house. Along the outside of the terrace a series of square, white pillars supported a low-pitched corrugated metal roof. Robin was standing in front of the house as we drew up. He was in his mid-forties, his brown hair just starting to thin. He was dressed in beige chinos and a blue cotton short-sleeved shirt, and wore large, horn-rimmed glasses.

‘Hello, welcome!’ He shook my hand in a very English way. Robin was born in Argentina, but went to boarding school in England from the age of thirteen. He then worked a long stint in the City and married his English wife, Teleri, before

returning to Argentina seven years ago. Robin and Teleri now had four children; at the time of my visit the oldest, Elicia, was eight. Teleri lived with the children during the week in the nearby village of La Cumbre where there was an English school; the two older girls went to the regular, Argentine school in the morning and studied the British syllabus in the afternoon.

Robin showed me to my room, where a wooden four-poster bed took prominence, its dark, polished pillars spiralling dramatically skywards. In the corner of the room a wood-burning stove sat alongside a basket full of logs. The floor was constructed from parquet squares of gleaming *algarrobo* – carob tree – wood the colour of bitter chocolate; a vase of fresh pink roses stood on the table. On the wall hung old sepia photographs of Robin's family.

'There's a key here if you want it,' said Robin, 'but we never bother to lock anything ourselves.'

Robin's family moved to Argentina in 1825, he told me a little later over a lunch of *milanesas* – breaded escalopes – and salad, which we ate on the terrace before the emerald-green lawn and golden, rolling hills. The day was sunny without being hot, the perfect temperature for sitting out in shirt sleeves.

'That wasn't the Begg branch of the family, but another lot. They moved from Scotland with an entire community. They brought everyone – the doctor, carpenters, bricklayers, an architect, a schoolteacher – on three ships.'

The head of this part of the family was William Grierson: he was Robin's great-great-great-grandfather. Grierson was a farmer. He sailed to Argentina on the *Symmetry* with his family – his wife Catherine and, at that time, three children – to help found the Monte Grande settlement just south of Buenos Aires.

The wave of British immigration to Argentina in the 1820s was encouraged by a liberal government eager to attract

educated people to its shores. Europeans had first colonized this land three hundred years previously, but the descendants of those early settlers had only very rudimentary education. Argentina needed to instil learning into its people – but the process would take time. The government therefore came up with the expedient solution of importing a population ready schooled.

The government drew up an attractive package of land grants and financial incentives for its citizens-to-be. Still, those Scots' pioneer optimism must have been blended with a heady dread of the unknown that Friday in May 1825 when they assembled at Leith and prepared for their long voyage across a tempestuous ocean. They knew next to nothing about the land that would be their home, yet there would be little opportunity ever to return to Scotland for the journey was horribly long and prohibitively expensive. Grierson wrote a diary during his Atlantic voyage which has subsequently been reprinted in a book, *From Caledonia to the Pampas*.

'Found the greatest confusion in every part, the Steerage baffles all description, Beds, Blankets, Clothes, Bales, Packages. Items of every kind all in a huddle. Sailors, Passengers, Strangers, sick, healthy old and young, sober, tipsy, crying, praying, scolding . . . If things are to continue as they begin, the sooner our voyage is at an end, the better,' wrote Grierson in his diary on 20 May 1825 of his first boarding of the *Symmetry*.

From his diaries, Grierson comes across as a stalwart Georgian gentleman. When in need of light entertainment, he partook of a round of whist. On Sundays, he joined the captain in reading sermons in his cabin. He was not given to namby-pamby ailments such as seasickness – yet there must have been times during the voyage when even the ever-upright William Grierson wondered whether it had really been such a great idea to throw in his familiar life in

Scotland in order to pitch and roll across the Atlantic just so he could set up home on a patch of grass he'd never seen.

On 15 July, the *Symmetry* passed through a storm so severe that even William Grierson's punctuation took a battering:

'The ship trembled, the Capt. called, the sailors roared; the sails clashed; the ropes cracked. the Ladies screamed; the crockery clattered; the children cried. – surprise seized me, and I cannot tell what I felt. – I ran to the cabin door and peeped out. – most awful!!'

When at last land was sighted at the end of July, Grierson – whose diary had in the previous fortnight descended into little more than dry comments on the wind and readings of longitude and latitude – appeared to be moved almost to emotion. His prose, which with the monotonous raising and downing of sails had become as grey as the endless slate-blue sea, was now festooned with colour and floridity:

'Winds of Columbia beat us not from your shore –,' he wrote on 30 July 1825. One can almost imagine his tears of desperation spattering the page as he dipped his pen in ink: land had been sighted the previous day, but overnight the winds had blown the *Symmetry* on a backward course. 'We are the Sons of Liberty. – we come to you because you are free. – we come to hail your Emancipation. – we bring you not fetters, slavery, nor Inquisition. – our prowess lies in the muscles of our arms, our weapons are the Implements of Ceres; her Seeds are in our Hold; our weather-beaten hands shall adorn your plains; we will become your Sons; our blood shall mingle with yours, and Columbian, and Briton shall have no distinction. – for, indeed, we are all weary of cross winds, and flashing storms.'

Finally, the Grierson clan landed safely in Buenos Aires. After all that trouble, first impressions frankly weren't that great. Grierson described the country as bleak, the city as gloomy, and the inhabitants looked 'rather foreboding'.

None the less, the Monte Grande colony flourished, as did the Grierson family. There were more children, and then grandchildren – and one of these granddaughters, years later, married Robert Begg, whose parents had emigrated to Argentina from Scotland in the late 1850s. It was Robert's son Robin, the current Robin's grandfather (clearly nobody thought to bring from Scotland a book of imaginative baby names) who started to build up the farm that today is Estancia Los Potreros.

Over the years, times had moved on a little – wind generators high on the hill now provided electricity, and Robin had rigged up a complex telephonic system from which he could sometimes receive calls if he stood very carefully at a specific spot at the back of the kitchen – but Los Potreros was a place that enjoyed the trappings of tradition rather than the latest gadgetry. Some of the staff came from families who had worked here for three generations. Both the grandmother and the mother of one of the kitchen girls had worked in one or other of the estancia's houses. The headman's son worked on the farm.

'And his son – well, he's too young at the moment, but I dare say he will too,' said Robin.

He rang a little bronze bell in the shape of a Dutch woman in traditional dress. A girl similarly attired in an apron and cap appeared from the kitchen, cleared our plates and served us coffee.

'I've got a few things to do,' said Robin as we drained our cups, 'so why don't we meet at about four-thirty at the gate over there and I'll give you a riding lesson.'

I went back to my room and slept off my journey and lunchtime wine on the four-poster bed among small hillocks of soft, feathery pillows. A while later, I woke, blissfully refreshed, to the sound of squawking parakeets outside the window.

I had some sartorial concerns about my riding attire. Back in England, I had made some cursory attempts to buy gear, but had soon given up.

‘In Argentina people just don’t wear this kind of stuff,’ the girl in one shop had told me conspiratorially as she’d waved at the rows of tweed hacking jackets and tight cream jodhpurs.

I had sent Robin an email asking what I needed to bring. A sun hat and some sun cream, he had replied.

In the end, I turned up at the gate in fleece trousers and a baseball cap. I asked if my headgear was suitable.

‘Yes, it’s all right for you to wear a cap like that,’ said Robin, ‘but no-one else can. Sometimes the gauchos turn up with them on and I say, “These people haven’t travelled halfway across the world to see you in a stupid American cap. Go and put a proper hat on!” ’

José, a diminutive gaucho with a broadly beaming smile, was saddling up the horses. He wore on his head a knitted black beret which slouched to one side of his crown like a lopsided tea cosy. According to Robin these were all the rage among the men at the moment – and approved of by the establishment, what’s more. José was apparently given a healthy supply of woolly berets by his enthusiastically knitting sister and brother-in-law. I could just imagine the pair of them sitting round the fire of an evening, sipping maté and roasting a side of cow as their knitting needles clickety-clicked in happily wedded harmony.

Robin, I noticed, was wearing jeans. I wondered whether he, too, had scarred inner calves, or whether his skin was made of sterner stuff. I suspected the secret might lie in his half chaps, a pair of which he lent me. Made of brown suede, they wrapped round the lower leg and were fastened with Velcro, while a strap under the foot held them in position.

‘Er, no,’ said Robin as I tried to put them on back to front. ‘Same foot, but the other way round.’

The tack room was immaculate. Sepia photographs of the family decorated the walls as they did in my bedroom. One photograph dated back to 1890 and showed Robin's great-grandfather sitting on a horse with a baby – Robin's grandfather – clutched in front of him.

Back outside, Robin introduced me to my horse.

'This is Ídolo,' he said. 'It means Idol.'

'Idle?' Excellent, I thought.

'Idol as in god,' said Robin, 'not as in lazy.'

Frankly, this didn't sound quite so hopeful. Slow and slothful I could cope with. On my first day on a horse, such characteristics were even desirable. But an object of idolatrous devotion? Wouldn't such a name give him ideas above his station?

It wouldn't be the first time a horse had been idolized in this part of the world. In 1701, a Spanish writer, Juan de Villagutierre Soto-Mayor, told the intriguing tale of the fate of one of Hernan Cortés's horses further north, in what is now Guatemala. Villagutierre has been accused by more recent historians of bias and inaccuracy; still, the story is an interesting one.

According to Villagutierre, Hernan Cortés – the Spanish conquistador who overthrew the Aztecs – had a black horse named El Morzillo of whom he was very fond. Unfortunately the horse injured his foot and in 1525 Cortés was forced to leave him in the care of an Indian chief near Lake Petén Itzá.

The Spaniards went on their way, killing, conquering and colonizing. It wasn't until 1697, more than a hundred and seventy years later, that their descendants returned to Petén Itzá. During that time the local population had never laid eyes on another horse. According to Villagutierre's narrative, their reaction to the Spaniards' arrival was a surprising one.

When the Spaniards rode in on their mounts, he wrote, one of the local chiefs 'almost ran mad with joy and with astonishment. Especially the jumps and bounds made by

the animals moved him to admiration, and going down on all fours he skipped about and neighed.'

The Spaniards then found on an island in the middle of a lake the image of a horse carved in stone. The locals appeared to worship it like a god.

'These barbarous infidels adored the abominable and monstrous beast under the name of Tziunchan, God of Thunder, and the Lightning, and paid reverence to him,' the horrified Villagutierre wrote.

It transpired that, after Cortés had left his horse there all those years before, the indigenous people had stabled him in a temple and fed him rich foods but, missing his oats or whatever, the horse had soon died. The Indians were terrified that his passing would enrage Cortés should he happen to return so they made a carving of the animal in the hope that the statue might appease him. But Cortés never did come back and, over the generations, the carved horse's importance had become inflated until it was considered to be an object of divinity.

Fortunately, nobody had explained anything of this to Ídolo and he turned out to be a delightfully placid creature. Ídolo was a skewbald criollo. Criollo translates as creole, and is the word used to refer to both horses and cattle indigenous to South America. (The word also denotes the human descendants of the early Spanish settlers, people who were of Spanish blood but born in America.) The criollo horse was not created by assiduous breeding; rather, it came into being through rigorous natural selection among those first horses who ran wild on the pampas.

'The horses brought from Spain most probably were of the same stamp as the horses Velásquez painted, ridden on by Philip IV. They were of course the finest specimens of their race to be obtained in Spain. Short-backed, and without too much daylight showing beneath their bellies, they must have been admirably suited for the hard work of a campaign,' Robert Cunninghame Graham wrote in *Horses of*

the Conquest. As generations of these horses' offspring bred on the wild pampas, they developed the tenacity and stamina for which criollos are now famous – though I was hoping neither Ídolo nor I would be required to show a great deal of those two qualities on our first outing together that afternoon.

'We use British military saddles,' said Robin, showing me how they rise high front and back. 'They're made this way because the army doesn't want the soldiers falling off.'

That sounded good and safe to me, and when José tied a big, soft sheepskin over the top, I began to wonder whether the arnica and ibuprofen were going to be needed after all.

'The Argentines hold the reins in the left hand,' Robin explained, demonstrating as he mounted a grey called Gaucho. 'This leaves the right hand free for a lasso, or a polo stick, or whatever.'

If I wanted Ídolo to turn left, I was to hold the reins high over his neck, and gently move them to the left so that they merely brushed his skin. To turn right, I should hold them to the right. To ask Ídolo to start, a little kick was required, and to stop, the gentlest of tugs on the reins. Frankly, it looked easy.

This style of riding owes as much to the Spanish conquistadors as does the presence in Argentina of horses themselves. The sixteenth-century Spaniards were brilliant horsemen. In fact, the Spanish word for gentleman – *caballero* – literally translates as a rider of a horse. When the Spaniards first sailed to South America, the Christians had just routed the Moors from the Iberian Peninsula after nearly eight hundred years of war. The Catholic Monarchs, Ferdinand and Isabella, had finally conquered the last stronghold, Granada, in 1492.

The raids and scourges of Spain had taken place on horseback – and, over the centuries, the Moorish way of riding had influenced the Christians. Cunninghame Graham explained in *Horses of the Conquest* that, unlike northern

Europeans, the Moors held the reins in a single hand and used a bit that worked on the neck, not directly onto the mouth. This meant both that the horse suffered less, and that the rider was able to turn his mount more quickly. When the Spanish came to conquer South America, they favoured this type of riding which was so well suited to warfare. Over the years, some adjustments have been developed – for example, the New World settlers quickly adopted a longer stirrup length than had been traditional as this made it easier to mount a semi-wild horse – but still today, influences from the first conquistadors can be seen in the riding style of South America.

I mounted clasping the reins in my left hand as instructed, gave Ídolo a little kick, and off we walked through the green paddock in front of the house. *Horneros*, or oven-birds, waddled with their awkward gait across the grass to our left. These are the national birds of Argentina, named after the 'oven-like' mud domes they build as nests; their rather drab plumage is compensated for by the strikingly harmonious duets they sing as couples. We continued along an inclined path that led out into the open land of the estancia. On both sides, plump sheaves of pale-gold *paja brava*, a type of tussock, swayed in the wind like thousands of perfectly bouffant heads of expensively highlighted hair. The grasses seemed to undulate down the hillside, turning a silvery-yellow as they caught the breeze.

'You should always have a bit of weight in your feet, that way all your weight isn't floating around on the top,' said Robin. 'The easiest way to do that is to put your heels down.'

José rode in front. 'Look at the way José's body relaxes into the horse's stride,' Robin suggested. I studied José's posture. He seemed enviably careless about the whole business. His spine just slouched onto the horse, it seemed to me, while his legs splayed outwards at an angle that looked horribly uncomfortable.

‘I’m not sure my hips extend at quite the angle José’s do,’ I commented tentatively.

‘Ah! It’s that dreadful saddle he’s sitting on!’ remarked Robin, throwing his eyes to the blue sky. ‘The gaucho saddles are awful things. They’re flat like a dining table.’

Robin later revealed that a guest had once been so impressed by José’s horsemanship that he’d offered him a job in England as a jockey, but José had chosen to stay here in his native hills.

The lesson continued. Going downhill, I was to lean backwards. Going uphill, I was to lean forwards. And if Ídolo became bored of this whole carry-on and thought it would be an awful lot more fun to trot, I was gently but firmly to rein him in.

Around us Aberdeen Angus and Hereford cattle grazed. Robin’s black Labrador, Pippa, galloped and frolicked alongside through the tall, softly rolling grasses, chasing delicious smells. Every now and then she eagerly dived her nose down a hole in the ground and rooted around while her bottom and fiercely wagging tail pointed high to the sky.

Alongside Pippa galloped José’s dog, a sandy-coloured mutt called Earless. There was good reason for his name: Earless only had one ear. But Earless wasn’t his full name, Robin told me. In formal circles, he was introduced as Earless the Fearless.

We ambled gently back towards the house in the late-afternoon sun, and Robin told me Earless’s intrepid tale.

Several years ago Pippa had been on heat and a horde of neighbourhood dogs had come round to have their wicked way with her. Earless (who presumably was called something different then) had valiantly defended her to the last – but the fight had been fierce. By the end of the battle, the knightly Earless had lost a lug as well as dangerous quantities of blood from his many wounds.

‘I didn’t think he’d survive,’ said Robin. ‘I was sure we were going to have to put him down.’

But Robin had underestimated Earless's indomitable spirit. The dog recovered – and obviously Pippa appreciated his help, because Earless went on to father her first litter of puppies. Maybe it was love.

But then, as in all good romantic yarns, disaster struck. The mettlesome Earless, high perhaps on success, became carried away. He went on the rampage to a neighbouring farm and killed a sheep. This is an unforgivable crime in the Argentine countryside, and the unwritten law of the estancieros dictates that the dog involved must be banished.

'So we sent him away,' Robin said. 'There was no way he could stay here so we sent him to another farm about forty miles away. But somehow he found his way back.'

Duly Robin and José sent Earless away once more. Again, he returned.

'Obviously forty miles wasn't far enough,' said Robin, 'so this time we sent him to a different place, a really, really long way away – I'd say at least a hundred miles.'

For a while, this third banishment seemed effective – and then one day, to Robin and Teleri's total astonishment, Earless turned up at their house in La Cumbre, an hour's drive from the estancia.

'We have no idea how he got there. He'd never even been to La Cumbre before. I can only think that he was nearby and smelled Poppy, our other Labrador who we keep down there. She comes up to the farm with us sometimes, so he knew her.'

However he found his way, this time Earless the Fearless saw his tenacity rewarded. Robin brought him back to the estancia and allowed him to stay.

The two dogs, happily reunited, gambolled along beside us. The land here was immense, wide and open. The sky was blue, the tussock was golden. I was entirely happy sitting astride Ídolo and watching the incredible scenery slowly roll by. None of the dire outcomes I had been warned

about seemed to be bearing fruit: my legs weren't sore, my skin wasn't chafed, and Ídolo smelt really quite pleasant.

We rode for an hour or two, then returned to the house where tea and scones fresh from the oven appeared magically on the terrace alongside a pot of *dulce de leche*, the sweet caramel that the Argentines so adore. I sat there, chatting with Robin, eating and drinking and thinking that, yes, this idea to come and learn to ride in Argentina had really been rather a good one.